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THEATRICALITY IN *MANKIND* AND *AUTO DE ACUSACIÓN DEL GÉNERO HUMANO*

José Manuel GONZÁLEZ FERNÁNDEZ DE SEVILLA
Universidad de Alicante
jm.gonzalez@ua.es

RESUMEN: El presente trabajo explora el potencial teatral que *Mankind* y *Auto de Acusación del Género Humano* contienen al pertenecer ambas obras al género de las moralidades, manifestándose, sobre todo, en las escenas de las tentaciones. De esta forma, contribuyen a incrementar la teatralidad de la acción dramática y a mostrar los nuevos valores y aspiraciones dentro de un nuevo contexto social y cultural. La estructura antitética de estas obras se evidencia de forma más patente cuando los dos personajes principales son tentados por Titivillus y Lucifer respectivamente. Toda la parafernalia teatral es muestra inequívoca de la progresiva secularización del teatro medieval.

Palabras clave: moralidades, teatralidad, secularización.

ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to give an interpretation of the theatrical potential of *Mankind* and *Auto de acusación del género humano* which belong to the dramatic genre of the morality play. In both plays the temptation scenes play a relevant role as they greatly contribute to increase the theatricality of the dramatic action in order to reinforce Christian beliefs and to dramatise the new values and expectations in a new cultural and social context. The antithetical structure of these moral plays is most effectively performed when the two main characters are attacked by Titivillus and Lucifer respectively. All this theatrical paraphernalia shows the increasing secularisation of medieval theatre as a consequence of the reaction against the spiritualisation of previous drama.

Key words: morality plays, theatricality, secularisation.

Auto de acusación del género humano is an example of Medieval Iberian drama which has been praised by its dramatic vigour and ingenious structure. It shares some dramatic features and theatrical elements with *Mankind*, one of the most well-known morality plays. Both are product of medieval Christian culture and both are rooted in

the traditional matter of didactic and moral works. They are concerned with Christian doctrine and principles to reinforce Christian beliefs. So “What these plays have in common most obviously is that they offer their audiences moral instruction through dramatic action that is broadly allegorical” (King 1994: 240).

Allegory permeates Medieval drama, flourishing in the moralities where personification or *prosopopoeia* becomes the principal technique used in these plays. Abstract entities, virtues and vices are personified in order to represent a different dimension equally real and tangible as the physical world for “Reality consists not in the material world around us, but in the eternal principles such as truth, goodness and beauty” (Richardson / Johnston 1991: 98). They are not atemporal or simply metaphysical because “[...] their lack of historical specificity is generally exploited by strategically collapsing the eternal with the contemporary” (King 1994: 240). All the characters in the two plays show an allegorical characterisation since they have a second distinct meaning. However *Mankind* and *Género humano* are not only a personification of all men. They are also representatives of any member of the audience as they stand for man in his daily struggle to achieve salvation today. They are the very centre of the theatrical action as the title of these plays suggests though *Género humano* only appears at the beginning of the play and his presence and dramatic delineation is not so successful as in *Mankind*.

They contain a great ideological potential as they are outstanding examples of the medieval drama of ideas. They debate and discuss religious principles and dogmas to illuminate “the actual situations of life” (Coogan 1947: 89). They have a practical aim and an immediate concern since they dramatize those religious truths and principles which are necessary for leading a Christian life and gaining the everlasting happiness of heaven. They show how to overcome the difficulties and obstacles of human existence through faith and hope. Thus theology becomes a keyword to know both the theoretical and the dramatic content of these plays. They dramatise theological doctrine which does not need further explanation as it is successfully delivered through dramatic representation. This theological concern is very much present and explicit in the opening scene of *Mankind*. Mercy’s words make sense because they tell us what the play intends and what is expected from him in the performance.

That for our disobedience he had none indignation
To send his own son to be torn and crucified;
Our obsequious service to him should be applied,
Where he was Lord of all and made all things of nought,
For the sinful sinner, to had him revived
And for his redemption, set his own son at nought.

(3-8)

This extract quite clearly states the importance of grace for *Mankind* to persevere and get heavenly joy with the help and mediation of Christ. It shows the divine influence operating in man for his justification which is not only due to God’s work but also to

Mankind's decisions and efforts. It presupposes a familiarity with the doctrine which is not fully explained and satisfactorily justified because of the theatrical context where these dogmatic asserts and postulates are reduced and simplified for dramatic reasons.

Mankind has been considered a play "theologically and philosophically subtle" (Lester 1981: XXI). There is a presentation and dramatisation of the nature and foundations of Christian beliefs as well as an interest in biblical references to justify the theological principles. Thus *Mankind* is expected to be patient laborious and successful in not yielding to temptation as Job was. However *Mankind* and *Auto de acusación del género humano* show different theological concerns. While in the former "salvation is a private matter between God and the protagonist that does not depend on sacramental mediation" (Watkins 1999: 771-772), in the latter it has a public dimension. It is given to Género humano as the representative and prototype of the Christian whose redemption and salvation is kept within the church. Therefore there is a different understanding and experience of Christian faith in both cases. The English morality play dramatically anticipates the Protestant interpretation of grace challenging "the church's monopoly on salvation" (Watkins 1999: 773). The new Protestant doctrine is negatively viewed in the Spanish play:

¿Quién ha revuelto ciudades
y levantado a Lutero
sino yo con mis maldades,
encubriendo las verdades
del alto Dios verdadero?

(81-85)

It clearly expresses the prejudices coming from Catholic positions. It is no other character but Satanás the one to blame for the Protestant faith since Luther is one of his followers. Moreover Protestantism is considered a sect spread out all over Europe:

¿Quién metió en Inglaterra
esa secta luterana,
y en Flandes, Francia y su tierra,
sino yo, por pura guerra,
y aun acá, en aquesta hispana?

(89-90)

To confuse and to manipulate truth seem to be the worst possible actions of Satanás. He is proud of it because the corruption of religious principles is the most direct and most effective way to make people sin.

The concept of salvation, redemption and grace in both plays have escathological connotations. Everything is done and viewed from that perspective. *Mankind*, an honest farming man, has to lead a Christian life in spite of the temptations, nonsense

and despair he experiences when he follows Titivillus' commands. He is well aware of the importance and nearness of the Last Judgment. He tries to be prepared for rendering account of himself and be saved by God's mercy. This is precisely Mercy's main objective and intention in guiding and advising Mankind. However things turn up in a different manner since he is tempted by Mischief (the chief vice), Newguise, Nowadays, Nought (the worldly vices), and the devil Titivillus who finally succeeds in making him believe that he can never be saved. He is in despair up to the point that he is about to hang himself for he thinks there is not any hope of salvation left. At this moment Mercy enters with a whip to punish the vices for putting Mankind in such a state. Once Mankind has been tested, he is aware that *vita hominis est militia super terram* and he must be ready at any time to meet God in the Last Judgment which is not dramatised in the play though it is omnipresent for all the dramatic action is viewed and structured with this theological truth in mind. A kind of "theology in degeneracy" is dramatised and visualised through comic action within an increasing secular context.

Auto de acusación del género humano begins where *Mankind* ends since it dramatises a judgment of man. It is not the Last Judgment but rather a kind of anticipation of this eschatological event. Género humano is taken to the celestial court to face a trial since Lucifer pretends to regain his command on him. He claims that if man sinned in *bonitate infinita*, his punishment should be infinite. And he cannot, therefore, be saved as he is guilty of sinning against God. It is a serious allegation which will need careful argumentation as well as a good advocate to refute Satanás strong arguments before Jesucristo, "Juez celestial" (287). It is Our Lady who offers herself to defend Género humano in the trial for he is not so intelligent and, to the audience's surprise, he is not present in the trial where his celestial happiness is at stake. And the reason for not being there is a simple one, "El hombre ha pecado" (712) and "como es culpado no se atreve a aparecer" (401-402).

The Marian influence is strong in both plays. They are interested in showing the importance of her advocacy and help to gain eternal salvation. Thus she becomes a fundamental point of reference within the dramatic discourse. She is mainly presented as *mediatrix*. Her maternal role consists in helping Mankind and Género humano in their struggle against evil and sin that can be achieved "By mediation of our Lady" (22). Mercy, Mankind's counsellor and companion, also depends on her intercession and favour. She is the "Mother of Mercy" (755) who intercedes with God on behalf of sinners. However *Auto de acusación del género humano* contains a greater Marian concern as Our Lady is one of the central characters of the play. She is praised as "Reina del cielo" (169), "Flor de virginidad" (381), "Madre de Dios" (382), and "Abogada" (408) above all. She tells us what her divine mission is:

Porque vengo a responder
en favor del hombre humano,
al maldito Lucifer,
que pretende someter
todo el mundo so su mano.

(421-425)

Satanás cannot accept it. He knows that his claim can no longer be sustained in the trial as she is powerful and mighty. He, therefore, objects that she cannot play the role of Género humano's defender because

tu Madre está excluida
de este oficio, y prohibida
por leyes de autoridad.

Porque si admitida fuese
siendo madre del juez,
claro el interés se viese,
que a doquiera que quisiese
lo traería cada vez.

(463-470)

It would not be fair to get her as advocate since the verdict could not be as impartial as expected. Justice and dramatic decorum make it inadvisable and inadmissible. However Christ, the judge, cannot disregard her wishes. Finally a justification is found for granting her request: Her condition of mother of God and of *mediatrix* of man allows her to perform that part.

Theatricality is another outstanding feature of both plays though it is more spectacular in *Mankind* where there is a great variety of comic and visual effects. The temptations scenes are the most theatrical ones where vices and an invisible devil appear on the stage. It is a kind of theatre of hell since they display all their tricks and dramatic skills to show their power, attract Mankind's attention and provoke the audience through dirty acts as when Nowadays asks Mercy "*Osculare fundamentum*" (142), [to kiss his backside], or when Newguise urinates with their backs to the audience. Furthermore the theatrical potential of the *dramatis personae* is fully developed by Mercy. He plays different roles and performs different functions in it. He is, what might be called, a pluridimensional character for he is one of the protagonists, Mankind's confessor, and a fundamental concept to get salvation. We assist to a reinforcement and multiplication of the dramatic possibilities of the characters.

The theatricality of *Mankind* basically lies in its antithetical structure which "is most obvious and effective in the two temptations scenes at the very centre of the play" (Davenport 1984: 41). Dramatic antithesis is found everywhere as it is the very essence of the dramatisation of the moralities. In the first place there is a theological antithesis between the kingdom of God and the realms of Lucifer which try to show their power and interests concerning man's retribution/damnation. Their dramatic confrontation is omnipresent throughout the play. There is also a dramatic antithesis since "It combines the blend of serious theme and comic action" (Vince 1989: 251) which is taken to their extremes. Theological principles are mixed up with comic characters with an indecent and irreverent behaviour. And the final antithesis is that between allegorical and literal meaning since characters and words can have a double significance and interpretation. Theatricality is also relevant in *Auto de acusación del*

género humano though it is not so strong and decisive as we have seen in *Mankind* which is a more innovative and theatrical play for the comic elements it contains. Gesture, rituals and visual effects are the most recurrent theatrical devices in the Spanish morality as when fire comes out of the mouth of Lucifer's mansion. There is also a certain sophistication in the props and scenery used as can be seen in the colourful gates of the three mansions (heaven, the world, and hell). All this theatrical paraphernalia shows the increasing secularisation of medieval theatre as a consequence of the reaction against the spiritualisation of previous drama. Thus "A group of moralities", *Mankind* included, "already detach themselves from the religious framework and begin to include philosophical and humanistic themes" (Vince 1989: 138). To view, therefore, this morality play only "as a product of medieval Catholic culture" (Bevington 1995: 103) is no longer sustainable because it fully embraces the new secular values which permeate the whole dramatic action of the play.

The dramatisation of bawdy humour and violent action provokes a new reaction in the audience anticipating the new theatrical interests and conventions of early modern drama. In these plays there is a positive concern for introducing new changes in dramatic form and structure which will contribute to the rise of a new theatre in the Renaissance. Several reasons can be adduced to explain it. The social and political situation brought about a new social and dramatic consciousness. A different type of performance was needed to satisfy the new demands and worldly tastes of a different kind of audience. Drama was forced to move from the pulpit to the street following the new secular attitudes and material values which are present in both plays. From this perspective it is important to emphasise that this theatre reflects a growing awareness of the tensions and preoccupations which people suffered at the close of the Middle Ages when a new view of the world and of man started to emerge. This is why there is a kind of social criticism in *Mankind* "which dramatizes a conflict of world views that indirectly served opposing class interests as it ultimately stages irreconcilable ideological and social struggles" (Cohen 1985: 80). In sixteenth century Spanish drama there was also "a noticeable emphasis on Erasmian concerns such as [...] social abuses, judicial corruption" (McKendrick 1989: 24). The administration of law and the judicial abuses are a great preoccupation in *Auto de acusación del género humano* whose protagonist has been unjustly accused by Satanás once it has been redeemed by Jesus Christ.

Language is also used to increase the secular potential of these plays. Bawdy language is the way in which the worldly vices speak in *Mankind*. It is a very fresh, comic and direct language, very different from Mercy's diction as it is a more formal and learned language. It becomes a real problem for *Mankind* because, as Mercy warns him, the vices' words and strategies have been devised to make him sin: "in language they be at large; To pervert your conditions all their means shall be sought" (295-296). "Dirty talk particularly with reference to bodily functions" (Davenport 1984: 42) is employed to create confusion and disruption in order to subvert the traditional order and to create linguistic nonsense:

But, sir, I pray you this question to clarify:
Mish-mash, drift-draff,

Some was corn and some Raff
 Unshut your lock and take an ha'penny!

(48-52)

We assist to a verbal perversion and manipulation. There is a linguistic distrust since words no longer communicate and make sense. Mischief's words contrast with Mercy's language which is characterised by its consistency and meaningfulness. For Mercy the function of language is not just to say but to mean. He, therefore, stands for an economy of language: "Few words, few, and well set!" (102). The linguistic position of the Spanish play is more traditional. It continues with the verbal patterns of medieval drama. However it gives great importance to non-verbal language. Gesture is for Satanás a repetitive way of accompanying his words as well as of showing his deception and frustration.

Mankind, a much modern and innovative play, and *Auto de acusación del género humano*, a more traditional play that repeats previous ideological patterns, represent the final stage of Medieval drama. Their dramatic innovations and theatrical conventions show a positive secular intention at the close of the Middle Ages. Besides both plays anticipate and dramatise an increasing secularisation which is reflected in the different values presented on the stage. Their ideological potential should be viewed as a reaction against an excessive spiritualisation of drama which contributed to change and subvert the medieval world picture. These two plays facilitated the growth and development of secular attitudes and interests which later on were going to be seen in the national dramas of both England and Spain.

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